

Adaptive Dynamic Walking of a Quadruped Robot on Irregular Terrain by Using Neural System Model

H.Kimura

Y.Fukuoka

Grad. School of Information Systems
Univ. of Electro-Communications
Chofu, Tokyo 182-8558, Japan
hiroschi@kimura.is.uec.ac.jp

Grad. School of Information Systems
Univ. of Electro-Communications
Chofu, Tokyo 182-8558, Japan
fukuoka@kimura.is.uec.ac.jp

Abstract

We are trying to induce a quadruped robot to walk dynamically on irregular terrain by using a neural system model. In this paper, we integrate several reflexes, such as a stretch reflex, a vestibulospinal reflex, and extensor/flexor reflexes, into a CPG (Central Pattern Generator). The success in walking on terrain of medium degree of irregularity with fixed parameters of CPGs and reflexes shows that the biologically inspired control proposed in this study has an ability for autonomous adaptation to unknown irregular terrain. MPEG footage of these experiments can be seen at: <http://www.kimura.is.uec.ac.jp>.

1 Introduction

Many previous studies of legged robots have been performed[1]. However, autonomous dynamic adaptation in order to cope with an infinite variety of terrain irregularity still remains unsolved.

On the other hand, animals show marvelous abilities in autonomous adaptation. It is well known that the motions of animals are controlled by internal neural systems. Much previous research attempted to generate autonomously adaptable dynamic walking using a neural system model in simulation[2] and real robots[3, 4, 5].

In our previous studies[5], we realized dynamic walking up and down a slope, and over an obstacle by using a CPG (Central Pattern Generator) and reflexes independent of a CPG. However, the irregularity of terrain in that study was low and walking was not smooth.

In this study we propose a new method for combining CPGs and reflexes based on biological knowledge,

and show that reflexes via a CPG is much effective in adaptive dynamic walking on terrain of medium degree of irregularity through experiments. In the proposed method, there does not exist adaptation based on trajectory planning commonly used in the conventional robotics and adaptation to irregular terrain is autonomously generated as a result of interaction of the torque-based system consisting of a rhythm pattern generator and reflexes with environment.

2 Dynamic Walking Using CPGs

2.1 Quadruped robot

In order to apply the control using neural system model, we made a quadruped robot, Patrush. Each leg of the robot has three joints, namely the hip, knee, and ankle joint, that rotate around the pitch axis. An ankle joint is passive. The robot is 36 cm in length, 24 cm in width, 33 cm in height and 5.2 kg in weight. The body motion of the robot is constrained on the pitch plane by two poles since the robot has no joint around the roll axis. For a reflex mechanism, 6 axes force/torque sensor is attached on a lower link beneath the knee joint. A rate-gyro as an angular velocity sensor is mounted on a body as vestibule. All control programs below are written in C language and executed on RT-Linux.

In this study, we define the virtual extensor and flexor muscles on a quadruped robot, and origin and direction of joint angle and torque as shown in Fig.1. In addition, we use such notation as L(left), R(right), F(fore), H(hind), S(hip), x (joint angle), f_x and f_z (force sensor value in x and z direction). For example, LFS means the hip joint of the left foreleg, and LFS. x and LF. f_x mean the angle at this joint and force sensor

value at this leg.

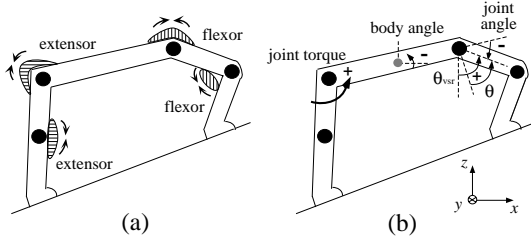


Figure 1: (a) Virtual extensor and flexor muscle on a quadruped robot. (b) Origin and direction of angles and direction of torque.

2.2 Walking on flat terrain using CPGs

By investigation of the motion generation mechanism of a spinal cat, it was found that CPGs are located in the spinal cord, and that walking motions are autonomously generated by the neural systems below the brain stem[6]. Several mathematical models of a CPG were also proposed, and it was pointed out that a CPG has the capability to generate and modulate walking patterns, to be mutually entrained with rhythmic joint motion, and to adapt walking motion to the terrain.

As a model of a CPG, we used a neural oscillator (N.O.) proposed by Matsuoka[7] and applied to the biped by Taga[2]. Single N.O. consists of two mutually inhibiting neurons (Fig.2-(a)). Each neuron in this model is represented by the nonlinear differential equations:

$$\begin{aligned} \tau \dot{u}_{\{e,f\}i} &= -u_{\{e,f\}i} + w_{fe} y_{\{f,e\}i} - \beta v_{\{e,f\}i} + u_{0i} \\ &\quad + \text{Feed}_{\{e,f\}i} + \sum_{j=1}^n w_{ij} y_j \\ y_{\{e,f\}i} &= \max(0, u_{\{e,f\}i}) \\ \tau' \dot{v}_{\{e,f\}i} &= -v_{\{e,f\}i} + y_{\{e,f\}i} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where suffix e , f , and i mean extensor muscle, flexor muscle, and the i th neuron, respectively. u_i is the inner state of neuron; v_i is a variable representing the degree of the self-inhibition effect of the i th neuron; y_i is the output of the i th neuron; u_0 is an external input with a constant rate; Feed_i is a feedback signal from the robot, that is, a joint angle, angular velocity and so on. u_0 is constant in the following experiments. As a result, a CPG outputs torque proportional to the inner state u_e, u_f to a DC motor of a joint:

$$N_Tr = -p_e u_e + p_f u_f \quad (2)$$

The positive or negative value of N_Tr corresponds to activity of flexor or extensor muscle, respectively.

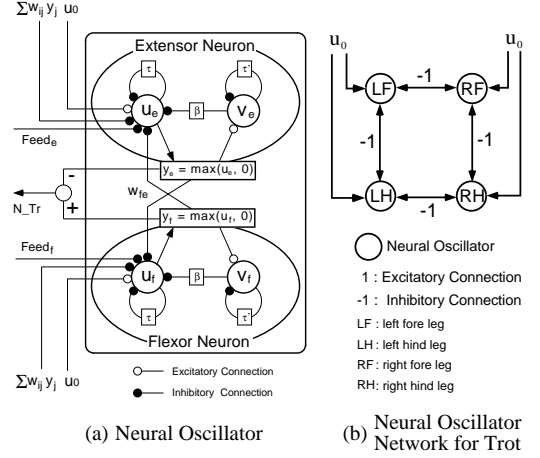


Figure 2: Neural oscillator as a model of a CPG.

A stretch reflex in animals acts as feedback loop. The neutral point of this feedback in upright position of a robot is $\theta = 0$, where $\theta = (\text{joint angle}) + \pi/2$ in Fig.1-(b). When we assume that a stretch reflex occurs on the loop between a CPG and muscles, the joint angle feedback to a CPG used in Taga's simulation[2] corresponds to a long term reflex called a "tonic stretch reflex". We use such joint angle feedback to a CPG: eq.(3) in all experiments of this study.

$$\text{Feed}_{e.tsr} = k_{tsr} \theta, \quad \text{Feed}_{f.tsr} = -k_{tsr} \theta \quad (3)$$

By connecting N.O. of a hip joint of each leg, the N.O.'s are mutually entrained and oscillate in the same period and with a fixed phase difference. This mutual entrainment between the N.O.'s of legs results in a gait. We used a trot gait, where the diagonal legs are paired and move together, and two legs supporting phase are repeated.

In all experiments of this study, only hip joints are controlled by a CPG and knee joints are PD-feedback controlled for simplicity. The desired angle of a knee joint in a supporting phase is 4 degrees and that in a swinging phase is calculated based on eq.(4) by using output torque of a CPG: N_Tr at a hip joint of the same leg.

$$\text{desired angle} = 1.7 N_Tr + 0.26 \quad (4)$$

By the experiment using only CPGs and stretch reflexes, where $\text{Feed}_e = \text{Feed}_{e.tsr}$, $\text{Feed}_f = \text{Feed}_{f.tsr}$, we confirmed that Patrush can walk stably on flat terrain. This control was almost same as the one proposed and

used in simulation of biped walking by Taga[2]. Patrush walked dynamically with approximately 25 cm stride, 0.8 sec. period and 0.6 m/sec. speed in this experiment. But Patrush failed in walking over an obstacle 3 cm in height and walking up a slope of more than 7 degrees by using this control model[3, 5].

It is well known in biology that adjustment of CPGs and reflexes based on somatic sensation such as contact with floor and tension at muscle of supporting legs, and vestibular sensation are very important in adaptive walking[6, 8]. Although it is also well known that CPGs switch sensory information for reflexes and activities of CPGs are modified by sensory feedback[8], the exact mechanism of such interaction between CPGs and reflexes in animals is not clear since the neural system of animals is too complicated. Therefore, we consider the following two types of models for adaptation based on sensory information, discuss about which model is better through results of experiments, and propose physical mechanism of relation between a CPG and reflexes in view of robotics.

In model (a), we consider reflexes independent of a CPG, and sum of CPG torque and reflexes torque is output to a motor. By using a phasic stretch reflex, a vestibulospinal reflex and a flexor reflex independent of a CPG, we realized walking up and down a slope of 12 degrees, and walking over an obstacle of 3 cm in height[3, 5]. But following problems were pointed out[9]:

In model (b), reflexes torque is output as part of CPG torque by feedback of all sensory information to a CPG (Fig.3).

Figure 3: Newly proposed control method consisting of a CPG and reflexes via a CPG

In this section, we consider reflexes via a CPG in response to vestibular sensation, tendon force and contact with floor. Since these reflexes may be confused with such usual reflexes as a vestibulospinal reflex and so on, we call reflexes via a CPG as a vestibulospinal “response” and so on.

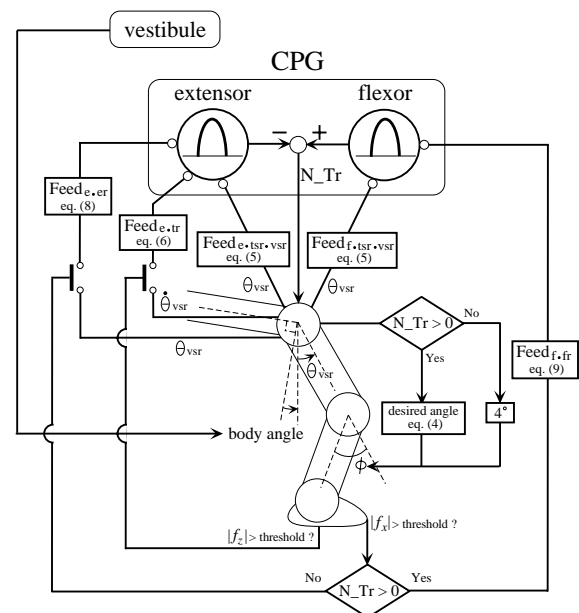


Figure 4: Diagram of actual control of a leg consisting of a CPG and reflexes via a CPG.

3.1 Vestibulospinal response

Since a tonic stretch reflex continues while a muscle is extended, it is appropriate to adjust activity of anti-gravity muscles for posture control by a tonic stretch reflex utilizing the body angle detected by vestibule. Therefore, the vestibulospinal response for posture control based on vestibular sensation is via a CPG and expressed by:

$$\theta_{vsr} = (\text{joint angle}) + \pi/2 - (\text{body angle}) \quad (5)$$

$$Feed_{\{e,f\} \cdot tsr \cdot vsr} = \pm k_{tsr} \theta_{vsr}.$$

Since excitatory feedback signal to the extensor neuron of a CPG in walking up a slope makes the active period of the extensor neuron of a CPG become longer, difference between phases of a CPG and joint motion becomes small. In Fig.5, we can see that the vestibulospinal response via a CPG in walking up a slope made the active period of the extensor neuron of a CPG and the supporting phase of a leg be longer in comparison with those in walking on flat terrain. This means that autonomous adaptability of a CPG solved the problem (1) mentioned in Section 2.3..

As a result, Patrush succeeded in walking up and down a slope of 12 degrees by using a vestibulospinal response much more stably and smoothly without increasing number of parameters.

3.2 Tendon response

Pearson[10] pointed out that extensor neuron of a CPG gets excitatory signal when the tendon organ detects the load to the ankle joint muscle in a supporting phase. We call this as a tendon response, which acts to complement thrusting force against reaction force from floor in a supporting phase.

We use amount of decrease of $\dot{\theta}$ of a hip joint of a supporting leg for the tendon response instead of the load to the ankle joint muscle. The tendon response via a CPG on a supporting leg is generated by the excitatory feedback signal: $Feed_{e \cdot tr}$ to the extensor neuron of a CPG.

$$Feed_{e \cdot tr} = \begin{cases} k_{tr}(\dot{\theta} + 1) & (\dot{\theta} \geq -1) \\ 0 & (\dot{\theta} < -1) \end{cases} \quad (6)$$

$$\begin{aligned} Feed_e &= Feed_{e \cdot tsr \cdot vsr} + Feed_{e \cdot tr} \\ Feed_f &= Feed_{f \cdot tsr \cdot vsr} \end{aligned} \quad (7)$$

By using sensory feedback to a CPG expressed by eq.(7), Patrush succeeded in walking up and down a

slope of 12 degrees (Fig.5). In Fig.5, output torque of the tendon response via a CPG appears as bumps on N_Tr while the extensor neuron of a CPG is active ($N_Tr < 0$) at 1.9 and 2.3 sec., for example. Although Patrush took 4 sec. to walk up a slope in the experiment without the tendon response in Section 3.1., it took only 2.2 sec. in Fig.5. This means that faster walking up a slope was realized by using the tendon response.

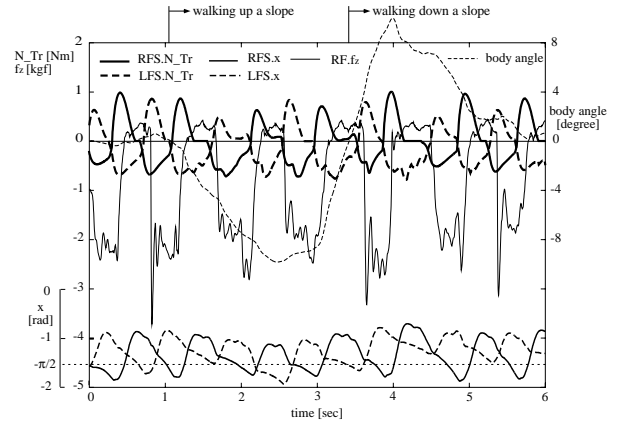


Figure 5: Walking up and down a slope of 12 degrees using feedback: eq.(7). $N_Tr < 0$ means the active period of the extensor neuron of a CPG. $f_z < 0$ means the supporting phase of a leg.

3.3 Extensor and Flexor responses

It is known in biology that the response to stimulus on the paw dorsum in walking of a cat depends on which of extensor or flexor muscles are active:

- [a] When extensor muscles are active, a leg is strongly extended in order to avoid falling down.
- [b] When flexor muscles are active, a leg is flexed in order to escape from the stimulus.

We call [a] and [b] as an extensor response and a flexor response respectively, and assume that phase signal from a CPG switches such responses[8].

For the extensor response, we employ the following excitatory feedback signal: $Feed_{e \cdot er}$ to the extensor neuron of a CPG, when reaction force larger than threshold ($f_x > 1.5[\text{Kgf}]$) is detected by force sensor while the extensor neuron is active ($N_Tr < 0$).

$$Feed_{e \cdot er} = \begin{cases} k_{er} \theta_{vsr} & (\theta_{vsr} \geq 0) \\ 0 & (\theta_{vsr} < 0) \end{cases} \quad (8)$$

For the flexor response, we employ the following instant excitatory feedback signal: $Feed_{f \cdot fr}$ to the flexor

neuron of a CPG, when reaction force larger than threshold ($f_x > 1.5[\text{Kgf}]$) is detected by force sensor while the flexor neuron is active ($NTr > 0$).

$$Feed_{f.fr} = (k_{fr}/0.12)(0.12 - t) \quad (9)$$

where $t = 0$ sec. means the instance when a leg stumbles, and $Feed_{f.fr}$ is active for $t=0 \sim 0.2$ sec.

Finally, feedback signal to a CPG to avoid falling down after stumbling is expressed by:

$$\begin{aligned} Feed_e &= Feed_{e.tsr.vsr} + Feed_{e.tr} + Feed_{e.er} \\ Feed_f &= Feed_{f.tsr.vsr} + Feed_{f.fr} \end{aligned} \quad (10)$$

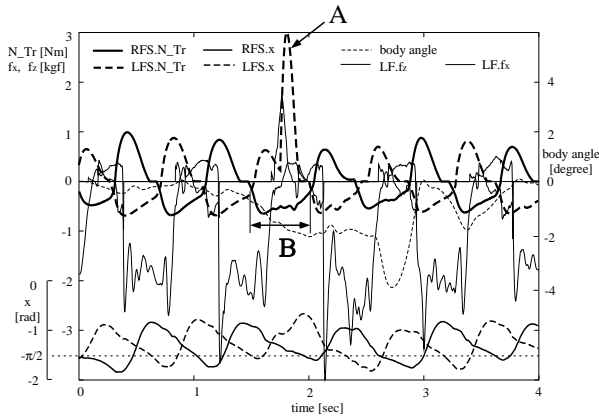


Figure 6: Avoidance of falling down after stumble on an obstacle by using a flexor response.

In Fig.6, the left foreleg stumbled on an obstacle at 1.7 sec., and neuron torque of the left foreleg (LFS.N_Tr) was instantly increased by the flexor response (Fig.6-A). This flexor response made the period of the swinging phase of the left foreleg much longer (1.4~2.0 sec.). Autonomous adaptability of a CPG made the period of the supporting phase of the right foreleg be longer correspondingly (Fig.6-B) in order to prevent Patrush from falling down by solving the problem (2) mentioned in Section 2.3..

3.4 Adaptation to terrain of medium degree of irregularity

We tried to realize dynamic walking on terrain of medium degree of irregularity, where a slope, an obstacle and undulations continue in series (Fig.7). By realization of such adaptive walking using control method expressed by eq.(1) and (10) with fixed values of all parameters, we was able to show that the control method proposed in this section (Fig.4) has ability for adaptation to unknown irregular terrain. The photos of

walking on such irregular terrain are shown in Fig.8 and Fig.9.

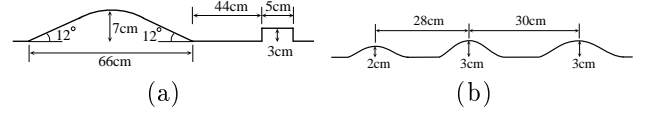


Figure 7: Terrain of medium degree of irregularity

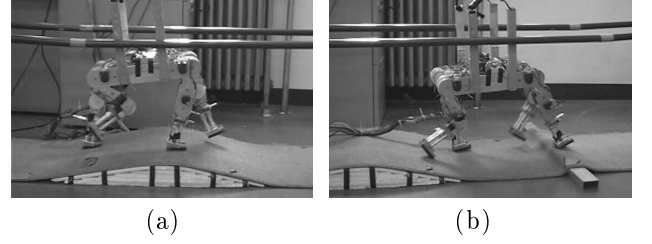


Figure 8: Photos of walking up and down a slope:(a) and walking over an obstacle:(b).

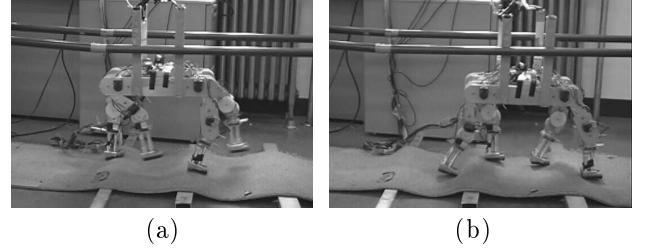


Figure 9: Photos of walking on terrain undulations.

4 What is walking using a CPG?

In order to make the role of CPG clear, we consider passive dynamic walking: PDW where a walking machine with no actuator can walk down a slope dynamically[11]. There is similarity between PDW and walking using a CPG in the sense that dynamic walking is autonomously generated on a link mechanism by external force (gravity) or internal torque (CPG torque) as a result of interaction with environment. The result of comparison of additional gravity torque in calculation of PDW with output torque of a CPG in experiment of walking on flat terrain is shown in Fig.10.

In Fig.10, gravity torque on a leg in PDW is reversed at switching of supporting/swinging phases. This shows that walking is exactly passive. On the other hand, switching of torque of extensor/flexor muscles occurs approx. 60 degrees in phase before switching of supporting/swinging phases in walking using a

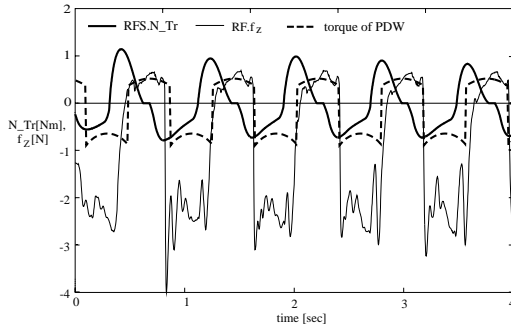


Figure 10: Comparison of CPG torque and additional gravity torque in passive dynamic walking.

CPG. This switching of torque of extensor/flexor muscles in the latter period of supporting/swinging phases is actually observed in animals' walking[12]. Through this comparison, we can say that active walking using internal torque is nothing but to switch supporting/swinging phases actively by switching of extensor/flexor torque. This is the reason why active walking using a CPG is much more stable than PDW under errors of initial conditions and disturbances.

Moreover, in dynamic walking on irregular terrain, we can say that the adjustment of phases of CPGs and active switching of supporting/swinging phases of legs are important corresponding to delay of motion caused on a slope and bumps, and extension of phases caused by reflexes CPGs are surely superior in this function because of abilities of mutual entrainment and autonomous adaptation. This is the reason why autonomous adaptive dynamic walking on irregular terrain was realized so simply in this study. As a result, CPGs are much more useful as a lower controller than combination of feedforward torque calculation and feedback control in the conventional robotics method[13].

5 Conclusion

By referring to the neural system of animals, we integrated several reflexes, such as a stretch reflex, a vestibulospinal reflex, and extensor/flexor reflexes, into a CPG. In the case of reflexes via a CPG, it was shown by experiments that the active periods of flexor and extensor neurons of CPGs could be appropriately adjusted autonomously by ability of CPGs for entrainment, while reflexes via a CPG output necessary torque for instant adaptation based on sensory information. The success in walking on terrain of medium degree of irregularity with fixed parameters of CPG and reflexes showed that the biologically in-

spired control method proposed in this study has an ability for autonomous adaptation to unknown irregular terrain. It was also shown that principles of dynamic walking as a physical phenomenon are identical in animals and robots in spite of difference of actuators and sensors. 3D dynamic walking on 3D irregular terrain is one of the next challenges this study aims for.

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